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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, July 5

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News Excerpts

July 5, 2017

Los Angeles Times

Labor Party Ousts Chairman as It Struggles to Challenge PM

Israeli opposition leader Isaac Herzog was routed in the first round of the Labor Party leadership election Tuesday, as the political movement that led the country for years continues its struggle to regain relevance. The primary election was won by Amir Peretz, a former Labor chairman and defense minister, with 33% of the vote. Avi Gabbay, a newcomer who defected from a center right party in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition, finished second with 27%. Peretz and Gabbay face a runoff vote July 10 to determine who becomes the new party chairman and opposition leader. Herzog finished a distant third with 17% of the vote.

See also, ["Israel's Peretz, Gabbay Head for Runoff in Labor Party Primary" \(Bloomberg\)](#)

New York Times

Indian Premier in Israel Seeks to Break Barriers in Trade, History

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has long argued, far from being diplomatically isolated because of its policies toward the Palestinians, Israel is constantly being courted by countries seeking help in technology, intelligence and counterterrorism. That narrative was reinforced Tuesday when Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India arrived in Israel for a three-day visit. Israel and India already share extensive defense ties, and India recently agreed to buy about \$2 billion worth of Israeli missiles and air defense systems, the largest order in Israel's history, experts said. The two countries are now looking to expand trade and cooperation in areas like agriculture and water management.

See also, ["Modi Visits Israel: Meets Netanyahu and Rivlin" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Rivlin: Israelis Value Diaspora Jews for Their 'Deep Pockets'

Although he relegated it to the tail end of his address to the opening session of the Makor Rishon Conference on "Thinking Differently," President Reuven Rivlin on Tuesday, whether intentionally or unintentionally, opened a Pandora's box on the true nature of relations between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. "Many of us still do not see the strengthening of the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora as an issue at the root of the existence of the Jewish people, a mission which is part of our duty to the State of Israel as a the state of the Jewish people," he said. "If we are to tell the truth, Israeli Jews see the Diaspora Jews as reinforcements for aliya, or to be blunt, a deep pocket."

Jerusalem Post

Dueling Homage Paid to Holocaust, Pal. Victims at UNESCO

The dueling narrative of Jewish and Palestinian victimhood came to a head on the floor of the World Heritage Committee Tuesday as the 21 member-states held a moment of silence first for Holocaust victims and then again for the Palestinians. Palestinian Ambassador Elias Sanbar stood in both instances. Israel's Ambassador Carmel Shama HaCohen objected to the comparison, particularly given his belief that terrorists were included in the designation. He instructed the Israeli delegation to sit when homage was paid to the Palestinians.

Abu Khdeir's Father Post-High Court: Lost Faith in the System

Following the High Court of Justice decision not to demolish the houses of the murderers of the teenager Mohammed Abu Khdeir, his father Hussein said: We've lost our confidence in the justice system. Abu Khdeir: "There's no justice, I see this in the High Court. We thought that there is justice, and they would punish them severely so that no one would think of doing what was done to Mohammed Abu Khdeir. Yesterday, when we heard [the ruling], we got a blow from the High Court of Justice. We're in a difficult state."

See also, ["Murdered Arab Teen's Father: Not Razing Killers' Homes Is Double Standard" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Prodding Hamas, Abbas Fires 6,145 PA Employees in Gaza

The Palestinian Authority on Tuesday "sent into early retirement" 6,145 employees in the Gaza Strip, declaring the move part of a strategy to force the Hamas terror group to cede control of the Palestinian enclave. "This measure, previous measures, and any other measures that may be taken in this framework, are temporary, and are connected to Hamas abandoning [Palestinian] division," the spokesperson for the government in Ramallah, Yusuf al-Mahmoud, said in a statement to the official PA news site Wafa.

Ynet News

Egypt Agrees to Reopen Rafah Border Crossing

Relations between Hamas and Egypt are growing warmer, as the Egyptians prepare for the opening of the Rafah Border Crossing this September, allowing free passage of Palestinian civilians from the Gaza Strip to Egypt and back. Millions of dollars were invested in preparing the Rafah Crossing for its reopening in recent months. Israeli security sources noted that the opening of the southern crossing and the deepening of Egyptian involvement in the Gaza Strip could have positive implications for the security situation along the border between the Gaza Strip and Israel. Its opening may also go some way to alleviating feelings of isolation in the strip, which is currently creating unrest among its residents which some fear may eventually erupt into renewed violence against Israel.

Times of Israel

UAE FM: No Words on Qatari Response to Demands

The United Arab Emirates' top diplomat said on Tuesday that four Arab nations have yet to receive details on Qatar's response to demands they made as part of a diplomatic crisis gripping the Persian Gulf. Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan declined to say what action the countries may take against Qatar. The Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt cut ties with Qatar early last month over its alleged support for extremist groups and ties with Iran. Qatar denies supporting extremists and has defended its warm relations with Iran; the two countries share a massive undersea natural gas field. Sheikh Abdullah's comments suggest the countries are prepared to take further action against Qatar.

See also, ["Qatar's Diplomatic Crisis Is Sapping Confidence in Its State Finances" \(Business Insider\)](#)

The Dawn of a New Party

By Ben-Dror Yemini

- In many senses, this is a revolution. Two candidates of Mizrahi origin won in the big race. You shouldn't make light of that. While it is true that Amir Peretz won once before in 2005, that was a slim victory in which he defeated the legendary Shimon Peres by a mere two percent. The crisis was quick to follow. Veteran party members quit. Others joined in their stead. Today is a different story. No one is going to leave. To the contrary, maybe—but only maybe—this is the beginning of a far deeper process.
- There is no longer any need for historic Mapai to apologize to the new Mizrahi immigrants since they now are at the top of the party pyramid. This is no mere cosmetic change. As of this morning the Labor Party became a different party. This isn't going to be easy since it is a beat-up party that has dealt itself most of the blows it has suffered. It is a party that time and time again has devoured its own leaders. It is a party with a broad—possibly excessively broad—array of opinions. It is a party that has excellent reasons to be proud of its history, but which has been hard put to offer a vision of the future.
- Veteran Labor Party members were interviewed repeatedly yesterday in honor of the party primary. Nearly all of them made the same comment: “The party hasn't presented any alternative.” It hasn't presented? Doesn't the public know what the difference is between Netanyahu and Herzog? Between the Likud and the Labor Party? Both victors—Peretz and Gabbai—as well as the other candidates, all have an identical platform. They all, more or less, support peace arrangements that are based on the Clinton parameters.
- The interviewers, here and there, offered their own clichés into the mix as well. Razi Barkai, and he is just an example, said yesterday that the Labor Party's failure in the next general elections was a foregone conclusion because “the public has moved to the right.” To the right? Willingness to compromise is far larger than it ever was. According to the latest poll by the Israel Democracy Institute, 55% of Israelis support the two-state solution. Admittedly, Israelis have increasingly come to despair of the Palestinians because of their serial rejection of every proposed solution. And mainly, had Gaza in the wake of disengagement become a model of a Palestinian polity that is focused on prosperity and its citizens' wellbeing instead of on an industry of death and tunnels, Israeli support for a compromise on basis of the Clinton parameters would have jumped to 80%. The Labor Party would have won 40 seats, instead of 24.
- The greatest paradox is that despite the way things turned out in Gaza and despite the Palestinians, a majority of the public is still more aligned with the Labor Party's positions. A majority of the public says yes to a Jewish state and no to a bi-national state. Yes to separation and no to annexation. Yes to restricting Jewish settlement to the major settlement blocs and no to huge investments to allow for settlement expansion. Yes to conversion as laid out by the rabbis from Tzohar and no do Haredi conversions.

- But they haven't joined the Labor Party because far too often leaders of that party have been drawn into adopting rhetoric that is more befitting a fringe party than a party that wants to lead the country. They have insisted on defending left wing organizations that have become part of the BDS movement. And they have repeatedly found themselves supporters who spoke contemptuously about tzahtzahim or mezuzah-kissers and who stole the show away two days before elections. Now that two contenders of Moroccan origins have won a majority of the vote, it is going to be hard to accuse the Labor Party of hating Mizrahim. At least that problem has been solved.
- Whoever gets elected is going to have to make inroads with the people who are on the fence and who account for roughly ten Knesset seats. These are the most deliberative and important people out there. They are the ones who can tip the scales of the next election. An increasing number of polls have found that one-third of Likud voters hold positions that are much closer to those held by the center-left Zionist bloc. The people [in the Labor Party] who rejected them, who were disrespectful of them and who failed to recognize that their concerns about the left were justified—pushed them into the right wing's arms.
- The results of yesterday's primary have made it clear that it would be premature for anyone to write off the Labor Party. The possibility of change is very real. Lapid has succeeded in making that change. While most of his recently-added seats have come at the Labor Party's expense, he nevertheless has also taken between two and three seats away from the Likud. Lapid has succeeded despite the existence of a very broad coalition—from Ha'aretz to Lior Schlein from Gav Hauma—that has maligned him incessantly. The very same people who have maligned Lapid have also called on the Labor Party to be "resolute" and to veer to the left. That is precisely what the next leader of the Labor Party must not do. Israel has no need for an alternative to Meretz. What Israel urgently needs is an alternative to the Likud.

Ben-Dror Yemini is an Israeli journalist and contributor to Yedioth Ahronoth.

Summary:

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Bibi's Plea for 'Patience' Over Kotel Crisis Is Disingenuous

Netanyahu travels the world trying to woo friends for Israel. Doesn't he care about losing the Jews?

By David Horovitz

- On Tuesday, The Times of Israel published the full text of the Western Wall compromise agreement, an extraordinary document hammered out over years of meetings and site visits that was designed to insure, now that the “main” Western Wall is de facto controlled by ultra-Orthodox Judaism, that non-Orthodox Jews would have a guaranteed right to pluralistic prayer at an alternative Western Wall space nearby. This agreement, which provides for 6 non-Orthodox representatives appointed by the prime minister to sit on a 13-member oversight council, runs to a frankly staggering 15,000 words, and constitutes a patently well-intentioned effort by the parties involved to reconcile profound sensitivities at the heart of the intra-Jewish relationship.
- So long and so serious in its construction, this is the agreement, solemnly approved by the government of Israel in January 2016, that was tossed aside by that same government by a casual show of hands, in a vote that was not even on the cabinet agenda, on Sunday, June 25. A week and a half later, there has been backtracking on a second incendiary decision approved that day, with the shelving for six months of legislation that would have cemented the ultra-Orthodox monopoly on conversions to Judaism in Israel. But regarding the crisis over the broken Western Wall compromise, no such headway has been made.
- Evidently, it is not a sufficient priority for the prime minister. That's nothing short of a Jewish tragedy. In an interview with this writer last week, Natan Sharansky, the Jewish Agency chairman who played an integral role in formulating the agreement, assessed that a formula would yet be found to enable its implementation. But he was far from certain that the trust between the Israeli leadership and the Diaspora representatives who worked so diligently on the accord could be restored.
- He's right to be worried. Indeed, I fear that the damage is graver still, and extends far beyond the shocked Diaspora leaders who believed — falsely, as it turned out — that the Israeli government's word was its bond. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — he who initiated this entire Western Wall agreement project, and he who so recklessly cast it aside — pleaded on Monday night for “patience and perseverance” to resolve the crisis, and insisted that he remains “committed to making every Jew feel at home in Israel, including at the Kotel [Western Wall].”
- But Netanyahu's credibility lies in tatters. It was patience and perseverance that produced the elusive compromise; haste and irresolution destroyed it. It may be routine for him — indeed it is routine in the rough and tumble of politics, in Israel and beyond — to twist and turn and backtrack, to make promises and then to break promises. But the Western Wall compromise was not seen by those who labored to formulate it as akin to a short-term policy pledge or coalition deal. For the leaders of the various streams of Judaism, representing millions of Jews, this was an agreement with the government of the homeland of the Jewish people that went to the heart of their Jewish identity.

- Some of them may have feared it. Indeed, some of them did fear it. But they did not truly expect to be treated like a rival domestic political party, a potential coalition partner to be unceremoniously brushed away when narrow calculations changed.
- Sharansky said he didn't think Netanyahu's coalition would have collapsed had the agreement been upheld. I'm sure he's right; the prime minister could have called the ultra-Orthodox parties' bluff. I imagine he wanted to demonstrate his commitment to the ultra-Orthodox parties, even if immediate coalition realities would have enabled him to face them down, in order to insure they wouldn't be tempted to go seeking alternative partners among his numerous right-wing rivals. All such considerations are not the point, however.
- Netanyahu and his government had given their word to the Jewish people. Israel had given its word.
- In renegeing, this prime minister — who commendably flies far and wide to build new friendships for Israel with world leaders, and who will rightly spend hours this week accompanying India's visiting Prime Minister Narendra Modi — risks losing part of our own tiny global Jewish family. Surely that alliance, that intra-Jewish alliance, should be of paramount importance for the leader of the world's only Jewish state.
- We Jews have always been an internally divided bunch. That joke about two Jews, three synagogues is wryly amusing because it contains more than a kernel of truth. We are an argumentative people. A questioning people. A tribal people from the Biblical start. In Israel, with the luxury of a Jewish majority, we've allowed ourselves to become an internally intolerant people, dismissive of each other and of our approaches to our faith, aggressively critical of each other in ways that Diaspora Jews would denounce and protest were they treated similarly by their governments.
- And we've allowed a dangerous mix of religion and state to flourish: Political power has enabled an increasingly dogmatic and narrow-minded ultra-Orthodox doctrine to tighten a stranglehold on birth, marriage, divorce, death, and now even prayer.
- "The State of Israel is the only place in the Western world where Jews do not have freedom of religion," Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid said in a 2013 speech to Diaspora leaders in Jerusalem. With the government of Israel having now spurned its own agreed-upon compromise on pluralistic worship at Judaism's holiest place of prayer, because it dared not face down ultra-Orthodox politicians who forbid any notion of formal status for non-Orthodox religious Judaism, that dire summation by Lapid is hard to deny.
- For years, when speaking about Israel, at home and abroad, and being faced with questions and criticisms from within the tent, I've often answered by acknowledging that of course we're going to disagree about things this country does. How could it be otherwise? And I've advocated that, as lovers of Israel who care about this precious country, their obligation, our obligation, is to redouble efforts to make it the best Israel we can, and to focus on those areas where we think we can make a difference. (That sounds bland, I know, but it's a kind of working-start overview, and from there you can progress to the nitty-gritty.)
- That advice does not resonate across the board among Diaspora Jews, and emphatically not among self-perceived liberal Jews.

- There are some who, watching the latest government capitulation to the ultra-Orthodox, will indeed redouble their efforts for a pluralistic Israel. (If they moved here in their millions, of course, they'd certainly win.) Others though, increasingly troubled by Israel's direction, will consciously or subconsciously take a step or two back — rethink their philanthropy, take a holiday somewhere else next year, keep quiet where they might previously have spoken up on Israel's behalf. And still others will become more vocally critical, destructively so — leaving the tent.
- The Western Wall dispute is a watershed moment. It's a catastrophe, not a hiccup. Having promised the most marginal, limited, nonthreatening legitimacy for non-Orthodox streams of Judaism, the sovereign state of the Jews betrayed that promise.
- I fear we will look back upon this episode with the deepest dismay and regret, as a moment when Jewish masses overseas started to shift — when those who were hitherto supporters moved across into the ranks of those who keep quiet, and when some of those who were previously silent became strident critics.
- Several times in the past few days I've heard people I know well, people who have demonstrated their love for this country, saying things like "Israel's losing me."
- Good riddance? To hell with them anyway?
- No, I don't think so. Our loss.

David Horovitz is the founding editor of The Times of Israel. He is the author of "Still Life with Bombers" (2004) and "A Little Too Close to God" (2000), and co-author of "Shalom Friend: The Life and Legacy of Yitzhak Rabin" (1996). He previously edited The Jerusalem Post (2004-2011) and The Jerusalem Report (1998-2004).

Summary:

In reneging, this prime minister — who commendably flies far and wide to build new friendships for Israel with world leaders, and who will rightly spend hours this week accompanying India's visiting Prime Minister Narendra Modi — risks losing part of our own tiny global Jewish family. Surely that alliance, that intra-Jewish alliance, should be of paramount importance for the leader of the world's only Jewish state.